

## Helium Heels

**E. Dorinda Shelley**

**Eleanor A. Hutton, Illustrator**

PRGott Books (Jun 22, 2012)

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*Helium Heels is a farm-centered picture book that takes unusual risks.*

Ghostly pranksters bring a touch of danger in E. Dorinda Shelley's eccentric picture book *Helium Heels*. With folk art by Eleanor A. Hutton, this day at the farm turns into a kaleidoscopic block party.

The book begins with young Kath and her pets investigating a noise near the farm animals' food. Baby ghosts watch from the rafters as a skunk appears from behind the can. Though they are presumably a carryover from previous books in this helium-themed series, the ghosts feel unexpected in this farm tale; as Kath and the animals flee, the ghosts startle the skunk, too, who sprays them—though it's unclear how Kath knows this. She is more of a bystander than the story's focal point.

After a round of tomato juice baths for the ghosts, the story leads into a second arc that features the ghosts playing another trick. They paint sleeping donkeys' hooves with helium-laced red paint that causes them to float and dance. When other animals and Kath witness the results, they try the paint, too.

These strung-together stories meld the everyday with the fantastic, but the balance is uneven. So much emphasis is placed on the events with the paint that the skunk incident begins to seem like an incidental prelude to reintroduce the ghosts.

More troubling is the suggestion that it's fine to force others to participate in an activity that they might not have chosen on their own. When the donkeys tell each other, upon waking up, "Pretend to be pleased," it darkens the atmosphere. The reality-altering paint feels pressed on them and at odds with the magical, lighthearted atmosphere that the book intends. The hen's declaration that she's "proud" of her ghosts for what they have done, which she couches as setting a trend and not playing a joke on friends, is also off key.

This third book in a series leaves questions for new readers. The ghosts' origins, and why they're mothered by a hen—an absurd but fertile premise—deserves at least a brief recap. The role of helium—a repeat item—also seems inexplicable. The text's tone is matter of fact, and the strangeness surrounding the farm is accepted as an everyday norm that is as confusing as it is intriguing.

The book's illustrations elevate it with free-wheeling arrangements and pops of color. They are crowded but capture the tone of the book, placing Kath and the animals somewhere between reality and fantasy.

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KAREN RIGBY (January 11, 2019)

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